

Integrating Extensive Reading in the UNP Active Communicative English curriculum through Readers Theatre

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Introduction

The University of Niigata Prefecture (UNP) was established in 2009, and one of its primary goals is to provide quality English education for students living in Niigata Prefecture and other parts of Japan. To enable students to participate in content-based learning in English, the English Program at the University of Niigata Prefecture aims to develop students' awareness and competencies in *Academic Communicative English*. Since its inception in 2009, the English programme in UNP has adopted extensive reading as a means to increase the English proficiency of students. Research has shown that one of the ways foreign students acquire a foreign language is through extensive reading. Past studies in ESL/EFL have provided evidence that extensive reading promotes learner autonomy which leads to learning and enhanced motivation (Dickenson 1995). In addition, extensive reading also deepens students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar (Nation 1997), and increases the writing ability and reading fluency of students (Mason and Krashen 1997). To encourage students to engage in extensive reading, Readers Theatre (RT), a drama activity, was implemented within an advanced Core English class in the International Studies and Regional Development Department (ISRDR). In this article, I will share how RT has been used as an in-class activity to motivate students' interests in extensive reading.

What is Readers Theatre?

Readers Theatre (RT) is an oral presentation of a story using scripts by two or more readers. It allows students to take virtually any piece of literature, analyse it and adapt it into a script. The script can then be performed with a minimum of preparation, props or scenery. Unlike traditional theater which relies on facial expressions and body movements, RT emphasizes mainly on oral expressions to portray a character or event. It involves learners in understanding their world through creating their own scripts, reading aloud and performing with a purpose. RT is easy to implement in class because it does not require full costume, stage sets and memorisation of scripts. To implement RT in the classroom, readers first read a story, and then transform the story into a script through negotiations with other group members. The readers then rehearse their scripts by reading aloud their lines paying attention to the way they articulate the words in the script, varying their tone and projecting their voice. As students perform for an audience by reading aloud from hand-held scripts, they bring enjoyment to both themselves and their audiences.

Readers Theatre and the emergent reader

There is a wealth of literature that documents the effects of Readers Theatre on emergent readers. According to Adams (2009), through RT, reading is conceived as an enjoyable activity. The mind, body, emotions and sensory responses are engaged simultaneously when readers read and perform a script. RT also allows emergent readers to participate in a story and in the process, readers are transformed into participants and the words become

alive as human experience. As a form of drama, students are able to enter into the world of a book and behave as one of its characters, and thus increase their comprehension of the story that they have read. By putting themselves in the shoes of the characters, students are able to grapple with the emotions, tensions and nuances of behaviour in a story. This increases their appreciation of the book they have read. In addition, reading specialists contend that oral activity is an important activity that can help to develop the reading skills of students. The pedagogical value of RT include increasing students' reading abilities such as reading comprehension, retention, interpretation, word meaning and word readiness (Adam, 2009) Even though the homogenous linguistic environment in Japan has exerted a stranglehold on the learning of foreign language, RT can help to stimulate Japanese students to read with greater means while expanding themselves with new exploration. There is a strong possibility that reading could be envisaged as a meaningful and enjoyable experience for Japanese students who have not cultivated strong reading habits in their formative years. Participation in RT script writing activity also immerses readers in every aspects of the literature. According to Hill, (1990:13), in creating RT scripts, students increase their knowledge of language structure (vocabulary, syntax and meaning), language use (forms and functions of language use) and their metalinguistic awareness (the ability to talk about language). Through the minute examination of the text and the rehearsals of the scripts, students are engaged in a unique reading experience. This motivates students to enjoy a book in an unhurried and non-threatening way which would increase their hunger for more reading materials.

Rationale for RT in the ISRD Core English class

The UNP Core English program aims to support students in reading skills. At the end of the course, students are expected to familiarize themselves with different genres such as articles, paragraphs, passages, novels, graded readers, academic reports, charts, graphs, and websites. The RT activity was adopted as a means to help students develop a level of comfort working with different genres. In addition, RT was also used to enhance students' comprehension skills and to deepen their appreciation for pleasure reading in English. As stated by Hill (1990), RT provides repeated reading practice that is crucial for helping students to develop fluency in reading. Repeated reading practice also improves students' confidence in, and enthusiasm for reading. Reader's Theater was also implemented to motivate reluctant readers who have not acquired the habit of extensive reading and to encourage Japanese students with higher English proficiency to explore different genres and characterizations. RT was also implemented to provide an enjoyable change of pace from the routine English lesson.

Implementation of RT

As mentioned earlier, the RT activity was conducted with a class of First-year students enrolled in an Advanced Core English Class. The class consisted of twenty students. The average age of students was 18-20, and their average TOEFL score was about 400-450. To encourage students to engage in extensive reading, students were instructed to choose a storybook from the SALC and read the whole story. After they have finished reading the book, they select an interesting scene and rewrite the scene using dialogues. They then rehearse the script and perform for the class. A sample script by student is as follows:

Sample script by student

(*Minor editing has been done to retain authenticity of material)

Title of Book: *White Fang*

S: *Scott*

M: *Scott's mother*

F: *Scott's Father*

N: *Narrator*

F: Scott, I heard some noise from outside.

S: Me too, Father.

N: Just then, Scott's mother came to their room

M: Scott, what's happening? I'm very afraid. I think that prisoner comes to revenge because you decided to send him to the prison.

S: Please be calm, mother. I'll go to see.

F: I'll go together. Where is my gun?

S: No, its very dangerous. You should wait with her.

F: This is our home. I have a duty to protect my family.

S: I know well. But if we are defeated, who will protect my mother?

M: Please don't say such terrible thing!

F: Oh...Ok, Scott. I stay here. Be careful.

S: Yes, Father. I promise you to return to this place

N: My dear...

N: They heard the bark of a dog

F: Our dog is barking.

S: He is a clever dog. He may threaten the enemy.

N: Scott went out the room.

M: Oh no!

F: Keep your cool. We must believe our son.

Conclusion : Response of students towards RT

In general, students in the class displayed favourable response towards RT as a reading activity. It can be observed that RT helped students to develop a sense of responsibility to improve their skills in reading. In addition, RT also heightened the self-esteem of students as they created an original script based on the book they have read. The increase in self-esteem was not only experienced by the skilled reader, but also by the unskilled reader who is keen to write an original simple script based on his/her appreciation of the book. As

students collaborated on writing and acting out the script, a sense of camaraderie evolved and as a result, students learnt to accept and approve one another. In the process of script negotiation, students also experienced using English in different authentic contexts. As students collaborated to produce a script, they also took ownership of their own language learning and became intrinsically involved in developing an authentic script that is relevant and meaningful to their peers. As one student puts it, *"I feel this activity is meaningful because I could pay attention to my pronunciation and speed of reading. I like discussing the script, rehearsing the script and acting the script."* There is no doubt that RT provides richness and energy in the classroom because students are experientially involved in performing a piece of literature. As a result, they become engaged and develop a sense of investment in reading because they are not only merely reading a story, but also putting into reality what they have read. This serves as a powerful motivating factor for students to cultivate the reading habit and to enjoy reading. Given the appropriate conditions, RT can be a powerful tool in motivating struggling readers to become self-sustained readers in the ISRD classroom.

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